

Eight Lessons from my Quarter Life Period

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Lesson 1. Your Quarter Life Period Is Meaningful and Necessary

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the 'quarter life' period of human life, roughly defined as the late teens to mid thirties. In the past, it used to be assumed that people went straight from being a teenager to being an adult. However, it has been recently recognized that there is a period of transition, in which there are certain things that need to be navigated and resolved. Some have described this as recognizing a new 'life stage', similar to how the teenage life stage was first recognized by academics and society alike many decades ago.

There has been particular study of the 'quarter life crisis', a phenomenon where young adults go through a crisis that looks a bit similar to a mid-life crisis. This phenomenon has often been blamed on recent economic developments, like

the 2009 global financial crisis, rapidly rising house prices, and the casualization of jobs, leading to young adults being unable to reach the milestones of adulthood at the same age as generations before. However, I think we could also look at it from a more positive angle: that the quarter life period allows us to fulfil several developmental goals, which ultimately make our lives much more meaningful.

I think the quarter life period allows us to fulfil three important tasks: to find ourselves, to find our purpose in life, and to find our values. The struggle to find one's feet on these three things, including both the necessary introspection and the social experiences, may be difficult at times, but it allows us to have firmly established views on these things at the end of the process. In turn, this will allow us to navigate life and the choices we face with more certainty and confidence in the future. And perhaps most importantly, to live a meaningful life.

I personally had a wild journey in achieving all three of the aforementioned tasks. Being LGBT in an era where those issues were at the forefront of the political culture wars shaped my identity. However, I also learned that this is only a part of my identity, and it doesn't have to define who I am. That identity struggle may have dominated my life for a few years, but after that, after I became more at peace with it, life simply goes on. There are many other things that are more interesting about me, that more truly and uniquely define me, and I found that life is more satisfying when I focus on those things more.

Being an independent musician and writer at the dawn of the internet and social media revolution shaped my development. I learned that contributing to the cultural conversation and trying to help make the world a better place is very rewarding in and of itself, and is what I want to do with this life. I learned that new and unexpected opportunities open up, and the

important thing is to be ready to take advantage of these opportunities as they arise. I also learned that change is constant, and phenomenon come and go all the time, so we should be flexible with our plans, and not fixate too much on any one development we see in front of us.

Finally, coming of age during a time of great moral debates helped me find my values. I learned the value of seeing things from all possible angles, and the importance of rational thinking, debate, and conversation with people who have a different view. I learned why liberty is more important than group identity, why tribalism is bad, and why echo chambers should be avoided at all costs. Most importantly, I learned that it is having values, and living out those values in some way, that makes life itself meaningful. Which also ties in with the purpose of my cultural work, and ultimately my identity.

In this book, I will share the lessons I learned during my quarter life period, and how these lessons have helped me find the meaning of my life. I hope it will be of help to someone out there.

Lesson 2. Everything Starts With A Clear Purpose

Before we can successfully do anything, we need a clear purpose. We need to clearly determine what it is that we want to do, and how we are going to do it. In fact, finding a clear purpose is at the very core of the quarter life period's goals. Finding one's identity and values naturally go along with finding purpose, after all.

Looking at the broader picture, even on a social or political scale, movements with a clear purpose and clearly articulated goals are also much more likely to achieve their goals, compared with movements that have a vague purpose. In 2010s Western politics, an example of the former was the gay marriage movement, and an example of the latter was the 'opposing the 1% and standing up for the 99%' popularized by the Occupy Wall Street

movement. The marriage equality campaign had a very clear and precise goal, and it was achieved in most Western countries eventually. In contrast, the vague goal of opposing the 1% and standing up for the 99% came with no clearly agreed way to do that. There were ideas like campaign finance reform and ending corporate welfare, but even the details of these things couldn't be agreed upon within the movement itself. In other words, marriage equality was a clear goal, while opposing the 1% was just an aspiration that soon fizzled out.

Similarly, there was a libertarian wave during the mid-2010s. However, much of the 'goals' of libertarianism were not practical, or at least could not be practically accepted by enough voters at the next election, and there was no gradualist reform plan as a backup either. The movement got nowhere, and soon splintered into even more extreme factions like anarcho-capitalism. By 2016, the year of Trump and Brexit, libertarianism was already clearly on the

decline. One or two years later, practically nobody was still talking about libertarianism anymore. While libertarianism had some clearly stated 'goals', they were practically unachievable in the short to medium term, which meant they were actually no more than aspirations. And like all vague aspirations, it ultimately fizzled out.

From these examples, we can see the importance of having concrete goals, and not just vague aspirations. Too many people harbor vague aspirations of what they want to do one day, but do not develop concrete and achievable goals to turn these aspirations into reality, until it is too late. The 'quarter life crisis' is actually an opportunity to examine our aspirations and turn them into concrete goals, and it is good that we are having such crises in young adulthood, because there is still plenty of time to change course and pursue what we really want to do. We may have had vague aspirations to do certain things when we were

younger, or even some 'goals' that were based partly on our ignorance of how the real world operates. However, now that we know more about how the world really is, these aspirations may seem to be naive or impractical after all. At this point, we need to consciously re-examine our purpose, and develop the concrete goals that will help us achieve that purpose.

Using my own example, I have long been outspoken about various social and cultural issues, and I have long had a wish to do something, anything, to help make the world a better place in this regard. When I was younger, I thought that I would do that through music. However, through my twenties, I gradually realized the limitations of only focusing on music. Don't get me wrong, I'm still a musician, and I still like to make music. However, there are many things in the world that music itself simply cannot solve. Furthermore, through the years I saw the ugly side of the 'music industry'. I saw that it was not a meritocracy at all, and

that artists who really wanted to make it big needed to pander to the 'fashion of the day' sentiments, which are ultimately controlled by the elites of society, as well as big financial interests. Artists who 'make it big' often end up losing their own personality in the process. These realizations contributed to me plunging into a period of deep pessimism.

Eventually, I realized that, what I needed was new goals. New practical, concrete goals, that can fulfil my aspirations, that I can implement step-by-step. I realized that, if I wanted to help shape the culture for real, I needed to do so through the power of ideas. I needed to develop sound, evidence-based and hence convincing ideas. This meant I needed to become more of a 'humanities' intellectual. I needed to learn more history, politics, philosophy, sociology and psychology. I went out and bought books, including university textbooks, in these fields of study. I already had plenty of academic training in another field, so

it wasn't too difficult for me to learn these things over a period of years.

Soon I also realized that, to keep my ideas grounded in reality, to test my hypotheses in the real world, I also needed to join the cultural and political conversation, as it was happening. I realized that reading second hand accounts in newspapers and magazines often means you are one to three years late to the conversation, so I had to get used to following the conversation in real time, much of it internet-based. Which meant I had to get used to reading more things on a computer screen rather than in print. As you can see, working towards one goal often leads to new realizations, which come with new goals to work towards. It is all a fluid, continuously changing process, to a great extent.

Lesson 3. Getting Clarity Is Important

The key to developing the concrete goals and step by step plans to achieve our big aspirations in life is to have clarity about what we really want. There are many ways to achieve clarity, including deep thinking, reading inspirational books, hearing the stories of other people, and even listening to music. (I highly recommend music as inspiration, being a musician after all.) However, one very useful thing I often do are 'life reviews'. It is an easy exercise that only requires a pen and some paper.

A life review begins with brainstorming. What things do I want out of life? What is missing from my life right now? And what barriers are there to me having those things? The next step is to explore, in-depth, every one of these points. For example, what can I do to achieve the thing I want? What can I do to remove the barriers in front of me? And what steps need to be taken to make the whole thing work? At the

end of the process, there should be a conclusion. What issues are there, overall? What things do I need to do, in the short term and the medium term, overall? And what are the priorities for right now?

Starting to do things is also a good way to gain some clarity. Sometimes, a goal can seem so big and daunting that you feel like procrastinating, putting it off forever. However, it is very important to make a start, even if it seems small. One may have big goals, but this can usually be broken into smaller steps. Moreover, even big developments ultimately start from small changes. This is true for both personal goals and social movements.

Furthermore, once you start actually putting your plans into practice, you will gain new insight, which will inevitably change your plans. Speaking from my own personal experience, it is pointless to develop detailed plans on

everything but not making a start at all, because plans that are not informed by experience are usually off the mark in important ways. It is like how big utopian plans for social change that are overly theoretical almost always fail in some significant way. Therefore, it is much more useful to have some initial plans, start small with those plans, and continue to develop and refine the plans as you go.

Lesson 4. Be Patient As It All Unfolds

Besides having clear plans and clear goals, another important thing to do is to simply be patient as it all unfolds. A related point is the need to be flexible enough to adapt with and even take advantage of the ever changing circumstances. After all, as the saying goes, change is the only constant in this world. And in the era we are living in, change is happening more and more quickly. And fear not, for change brings new opportunities, opportunities that you might not even be able to imagine before you see it.

In just the 35 years I have been in this world so far, so much has changed. This is especially true regarding media and culture. There was a time when the world was strictly divided between active cultural creators (which was really only people in the establishment media) and passive cultural consumers (everyone else). You had to go on TV or radio to get your message heard by

people other than your friends or family. You had to go through a publisher to get your book in front of readers. The opportunity to do either of these things were restricted to only a very small number of people. Even if you just wanted to share a brief thought with the rest of the world, like the equivalent of putting out a tweet today, the 'easiest' way to do that would be to submit a letter to the editor in a newspaper or magazine. Even then, only a handful of submitted letters get published every time. Participation in the cultural conversation was heavily restricted to less than 0.1% of the population. It might seem like a long time ago, but it was actually the world I grew up in. What we have now may have its problems, like the 'toxicity' of social media, but it's still a big improvement over what we used to have. Which is why, whenever I hear establishment elites complain about how social media is affecting our cultural and political discourse, I suspect that they are really unhappy about their privilege being reduced, deep down inside. Anyway, my point is, sometimes new

opportunities open up, due to technological shifts and/or cultural shifts, and they literally change everything.

There has also been plenty of social change. Coming out as LGBT was a big deal, until it was not. I remember when I did it, just 15 years ago, there was a lot of what I call 'lack of understanding'. It wasn't that people were bad about it, it was that they didn't know what to make of it. I know it's still far from perfect nowadays, but it's still easier to get your point across, at least. Also, gay marriage used to be a big deal, until it was not, and most people just accepted it as a normal part of life. Of course, what tends to be forgotten is that, these social changes have opened up new possibilities. What couldn't be done before can now be done. I have heard several stories about people who found it too hard to come out in the 1990s and 2000s, but were able to do it recently. Many gay couples, who were not able to have their relationship recognized with dignity by

society and the law, some who even had to keep their relationship a secret, have recently married late in life, doing what society denied them when they were younger. My point is, what you can't have today, you may still be able to have later on. Good things come to those who are patient. (Of course, this is not to deny the hard work of the advocates who made these changes happen in the first place. But patience is still required, right?)

Of course, the world is still quite imperfect. And sometimes, some things even get worse before they get better. However, we have to remember it is always a 'still evolving' situation. If some things are possible today which weren't possible in the 1990s, then there will be plenty of opportunities available in the future that we simply can't even imagine today. This is why, in planning for our goals, we must be open to the availability of even better opportunities down the line. More importantly, even if there are goals or aspirations which we can't find a clear

pathway towards achieving right now, we don't necessarily have to give up on those. I think, given the always changing nature of society, technology and the opportunities on offer, we should just keep those hopes on hold, and keep looking out for potential relevant opportunities.

The other important thing is, while we do have to live our lives in the moment, which is set in a particular place and time, with its particular issues and challenges, I think we should not lose sight of the broader picture. As the saying goes, 'this too shall pass', and we should not assume that conditions will stay like this for the rest of our lives. Whatever barriers are in front of us today, including barriers that may look insurmountable, they could be gone just like that. Whatever frustrations we have today, they could be irrelevant tomorrow. The people we consider friends or enemies today, that may not matter anymore tomorrow. Therefore, I think we should not let our worldview be colored too much by what difficulties we are facing today.

Because this will only make us inflexible,
unadaptive, and unable to take advantage of
new opportunities as they come. In life, it is
always those who can adapt that win in the end.

Lesson 5. It's Not Always A Meritocracy

Now, let's get to one of the hardest things I have to say in this book: it's not always a meritocracy. Let's face it: even in the 21st century Western world, it's not always those who have the best talent, those who come up with the best ideas, or work the hardest, who get the biggest prizes in life. Things like money and connections still matter, and they perhaps still matter more than anything else, even in our society today. It's simply a matter of fact. We may wish society to be fairer, we may even put in some effort to make it fairer, but at the moment, it really ain't so fair yet. Equality of opportunity is a major aspiration, on which society has moved forward quite a bit in the past two centuries, but there is still a long way to go.

Unfortunately, part of growing up is to know this truth, and to come to terms, and make peace with, this fact. Not everyone who is good

at computers and programming can start the next Facebook: you need to have the connections to get the investment in the first place. Not everyone who is good at music can be the next big thing in the music industry: you probably need to come from a rich family too. And not everyone who has interesting ideas and great analyses can be an award winning journalist: you need to know the right people and be able to get yourself into one of the big name newspapers or magazines first. In most cases at least, no amount of hard work or preparation can overcome these barriers. And these are just a few examples. Many people hit this realization some time in their twenties. One doesn't even need to be particularly ambitious to hit this realization: there are similar background-based barriers no matter what career you want, from politicians, to lawyers, to screenwriters, just to name a few. Now, this may seem like a depressing realization, but it is also a liberating one. At least you don't have to compare yourself to those few people who have

made it by 25. They probably have some kind of unfair advantage over you.

Indeed, understanding that it's not always a meritocracy provides the foundation to seeing where there could be an uneven playing field, so we can advocate for change. For example, I have tried to point out that Wikipedia's Notability Criteria, which essentially prevents entries being created on most people and ideas that haven't been extensively covered by mainstream media, leads to a biased coverage of the ideas and arguments out there, which in turn contributes to an uneven playing field in the free market of ideas. This would also clearly be a bias in favor of the elite establishment's preferred ideas, because they alone control the mainstream media, and what ideas get coverage there. People who argue against my view often say that Wikipedia is simply reflecting reality as it is, and Wikipedia articles have to be 'earned', whatever that means. The implications behind what these people are

saying is essentially that ideas which receive mainstream media coverage are more sound. This can only be because they don't understand, or at least are not conscious enough of the fact, that it is not always a meritocracy. This example shows the importance of understanding that it's not a meritocracy, if we are to effectively advocate for a fair playing field in many areas of life.

Of course, the other thing we all need to do is to at least sort of make peace with the fact that it's not always a meritocracy. Indeed, I think that one of the often under-discussed aspects of a 'quarter life crisis' is the difficult process some people have with making peace with this fact. Some people may ask, if the playing field is unfair, is there still meaning in striving to do better? I think this doubt is ultimately rooted in having a view of life as a competition. The important thing is to stop thinking of life as a competition. Instead, think of life as a mission. Find your purpose and work towards that

purpose. While life may not always be fair, there are usually still plenty of opportunities to do what you need to do to work towards your purpose, whatever that might be. The journey might be long, and you might have it harder than some other people, but it will also be meaningful and productive. I believe that, if we find our purpose, and work towards that, we will be able to live life with no regrets. Even if the world is unfair.

Lesson 6. Expect the Unexpected

One thing we have to be mindful of, at all times, is to expect the unexpected. I have had enough unexpected things happen in my life to know this. What it means is that our plans must be flexible enough, and that we can't really be sure that what looks to be 'settled' is indeed 'settled' for all time.

The biggest example of 'expect the unexpected' for me has to be the mainstreaming of trans issues, ever since the so-called 'trans tipping point' back in 2014-15. When I was younger, I always thought that being trans was an entirely private thing, that the rest of the world would never understand anyway. When I first came out, people told me that it could take 100 years for the world to finally understand trans people, and I actually agreed with them. For a long time, trans issues existed in a bubble that belonged solely to the trans community, and were largely separated from the rest of the world. There was

a kind of safety, and even a sense of security for trans people, in that we wouldn't be subject to the same kind of public debate that gay people were facing during the gay marriage debate.

This safety net gradually evaporated after the 'trans tipping point', an event which was celebrated by progressive intellectuals. I remember many trans people actually having mixed and conflicted feelings about the 'trans tipping point', which mainstream media neglected to mention at all. Suddenly, we were at the center of one of the hottest culture wars of Western politics. I remember thinking to myself, what did I do to deserve this. I mean, I had long been a good ally on gay marriage, I was not racist or bigoted in any way, and I was never one to stoke the fire of the culture wars. I clearly did not deserve to be engulfed by a culture war that I did not choose to be involved in.

However we felt, we, the trans community, now had to learn to live with the new reality, where non-trans people would join our conversation and even use us as political footballs. It was something we neither chose nor expected. But we had to adapt, in either case, if just to survive. In the years ahead, I saw our formerly more united and peaceful community splinter and diverge in interesting but also tragic ways, as different people adapted to the changing circumstances differently.

The 'trans tipping point' made me realize two things: firstly, even the most basic assumptions you have of the world around you can change relatively suddenly, and leave you scrambling to regain your understanding of reality. Secondly, external events beyond your control can have a fundamental impact on your identity, your plans for life, and the way you relate to the world, and it can hit you where you least expect it. The impact these realizations had on me was the kind of impact that you really have to

experience first-hand to understand. I mean, I haven't actually lived through a war, a revolution or anything as upsetting to one's world as that, but I guess this has got to be at least similar in some way.

How does one keep their sanity when their world is being torn apart, and one can't control or even negotiate with the process? For me, the answer is in my values and my purpose. In a blurry and changing world, my values and my purpose are still clear, stable and strong. They are the only reliable constants in a world where nothing can be assured to be 'settled' for good. By always staying true to my values, and not giving up on my purpose and goals in life, there is something to hold on tight to, even as the world keeps spinning around.

Lesson 7. What Is Settled Isn't Settled

All the changes that have happened during my lifetime so far, including the rapid evolution of technology and the resultant changes to the media and cultural landscape, the ever shifting political winds, and most profoundly for me, the 'trans tipping point' and its effects, have taught me one important lesson: that what appears to be settled isn't really settled for all time.

Something may appear to be final or unchanging right now, only for it to be history in a few years' time.

On one hand, this could be an unsettling realization. As human beings, we crave security, stability, and above all, certainty. The fact that nothing is ever really 'settled' makes us uneasy. However, there are actually two sides to this coin. It also means that, if we don't like the reality we face now, there is always the prospect of change for the better. It's like how a political party that suffered a profound election

loss could come back to win big in a few years' time. Even referendum are reversible in not-too-long timeframes, with changes of public opinion, as gay marriage demonstrated.

Similarly, if we feel like we made the wrong choice on something, there is no need for regret, because the effects are likely not so permanent. In particular, young adults often fear that the choices they make will define them for the rest of their lives, which means they must make the correct choice now. This is often what leads to the paralysis of the 'quarter life crisis'. However, what we should remember is that, most choices we make in our 20s or even 30s are not so irreversible, especially when you look at the longer term, because things are not settled forever.

Lesson 8. It's The Journey That's Important

As I am sitting here writing this (2021), the world is going through the biggest pandemic in a century, and it has been going on for more than a year and a half now. As a result of the pandemic, and the restrictions imposed in many countries around the world, many of us have spent a lot more time stuck indoors, at home, these two years. Even though experts have been warning that something like this might happen, it seems like most people were not psychologically prepared. I guess most people probably don't think about things like this, until they have become reality. As a result of the drastic lifestyle changes required, it has been a hard time for many people.

During this time, many people have been coping by finding things to do. One trend is that people are rediscovering things they had been interested in some time ago. Sales of once-popular book series like Harry Potter and

Twilight are skyrocketing again. Old music videos are receiving new waves of views on YouTube, with people in the comments section talking about how great music was in the 'good old days', this meaning the 80s, 90s, or even just the 2000s, depending on the context. And then, there are the endless old movie marathons people are having on Netflix.

During these two years, I have done my fair bit of looking back at life, and rediscovering lost interests and memories. And what I realized was that, I have actually gone through an interesting journey, and seen many interesting things, in the three and a half decades I have been here in this world. I've seen the many popular cultural phenomenon, including movies, music and books, that have come and made an impact, and how people have connected with and found inspiration and strength in these things. I've seen real history happen: the fall of the Berlin Wall (which I was too young to actually remember but it was one

of the most talked about recent historical events of my childhood era), the arrival of the 'new millennium' (and all the buzz leading up to that), 9/11 (which was sad but it also showed the resilience of the human spirit), the global financial crisis (also sad but it reminded society that economics and making money isn't everything), and of course, marriage equality. And I also saw the most important part of the development of personal computers and the internet, from the early 90s when most computers were text-based (i.e. command prompt) and came with black and white screens, to today's social media connected world. It really is amazing.

What I then realized was that, life is a journey, where you get to see and experience many interesting things, that will not only become fond memories, but also become part of who you are. The cultural phenomenon that inspired our thinking, the historical events that taught us valuable lessons, they all become part of our

conscience. While we all want to get somewhere (achieve our goals) in life, we shouldn't forget that getting there is also an interesting journey in and of itself. We really should take some time to appreciate the journey of life, the journey we have been on, to get to where we are now.